

# TRENDLINES

*The Employers' Association's monthly whitepaper on essential Business/Human Resources practices*

The Employers' Association (TEA) delivers reports for businesses that contain relevant and up-to-date information based on our work with hundreds of employers each month. TEA is known to produce a number of essential benchmark survey reports every year and we also compile data and observations that provide organizations practical perspectives on important business trends.

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## Business Practices Regarding Equity

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### What you should know

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Equity does not mean equal or identical. Everyone does not need to be (nor should be) treated exactly the same (for example, to be effective, organizations may need to provide open enrollment information to employees who do not speak English in a different way than they present the information to English speakers). Equity is built on the belief that no one should be *unfairly* advantaged or disadvantaged in the workplace. This can cross many well-known dimensions such as race, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, age, sex, (dis)abilities, religion, veteran status, but it can also include other factors like socio-economic status, appearance, college allegiance, accents, personalities, and cultural practices (to name a few). Inequity exists when there is preference for (or against) others based on any of these dimensions.

Some organizations believe there is a value to hiring and advancing people from a particular archetype (sometimes even having different profiles for different roles). They know what to expect and how to interact with certain people having a given set of experiences and feel that since “It has worked this long, why would we need to change?” In reality, even if something currently feels like it is “working,” it is not a wise business decision to do things as they always have been done as the world continues to become flatter (people have more access to information and resources that once were only accessible to a select few).

As the world continues to change and evolve, organizations that do not address their inequity will face many challenges finding and keeping the most talented employees. People will choose to avoid businesses (as employees, customers/clients or vendors) that “allow” inappropriate factors to be part of the decisions made. Social media has made awareness of these practices easier to discover and more impactful than ever before. Many younger employees for years have used equity as a litmus test for where they want to begin a career and it appears to be even stronger with the next generation entering workplaces.

### What we know

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The benefits that diverse and inclusive Organizations share include:

- They can more easily attract and retain the top candidates since the job seekers see opportunities instead of glass ceilings and sticky floors
- They are more creative and innovative in generating more (and more effective) ideas than are Organizations having more homogenous groups

- They are more trusted (and respected) in the community because the business reflects the community and the community's interest/needs
- They are better problem solvers since they have more experiences from which to pull
- They benefit from higher employee development because there are no artificial barriers holding back individual or group potential
- They experience more employee engagement since everyone feels they belong (and are not inappropriately excluded)

Businesses that make an equity connection with their mission and vision have a much easier time aligning what they do and how they do it. These organizations also know there are costs (financial and otherwise) to not addressing bias and inequities in their organizations as well as the stated benefits when these biases are minimized.

The Employers' Association has provided Organization Development solutions and helped align organizational needs with people needs while working to ensure equity and organizational sustainability for decades. We continue to help organizations on their journey whether it is through a compliance lens (developing and acting on Affirmative Action Plans and workplace harassment awareness trainings) or through a developmental lens (trainings, round tables, individual coaching or the development of policies, practices and internal systems that focus on inclusion and equity). We have seen (and worked with) a large number of employers that do it well as well as many that are struggling (through our administration and analysis of employee engagement surveys). Our compensation reviews/designs have been useful to identify and address potential inequities in pay and other compensation. A review of common business practices through an equity lens can provide much needed insight as to what truly attracts and retains talent.

## What it means

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Most businesses care about “the employee experience” but have not always created tangible practices (or developed key measurable indicators) to demonstrate their concern. When unconscious bias is not addressed in hiring, promotions, and disciplinary decisions – and/or micro-aggressions are acceptable in meetings and personal interactions...and/or harassment and bullying are not treated with the same level of concern as physical harm...and/or some employees remain “invisible” and less valuable – it is hard to make a case for equity in one's workplace. The adage, “We judge others based on their behaviors but we judge ourselves based on our intentions” is true not only for us as individuals but also for our organizations. A lot of great ideas might be percolating behind closed doors but until those doors are intentionally opened and ideas are formed with the participation of all (and have a direct impact on all people's lives), the value of even the best of ideas does not exist for those excluded from the decision-making process as individuals tend to seek action rather than plans.

Great leaders know it is important to foster trust. Breaking trust is easy. Maintaining trust is difficult and takes deliberate effort. When organizations are committed to creating and maintaining inclusive and equitable workplaces, the work never ends (nor will the benefits that such deliberate efforts bring). This is true for most things that are important in our lives – we cannot ignore them and assume they will stay strong and healthy. We need to be intentional and strategic (rather than reactionary) in all we say and do to strengthen relationships and demonstrate trustworthiness.

Choosing to allow harm to occur to some is a risk management business decision in much the same way that continuing to serve scalding hot coffee is a business decision (“more people like the coffee hot than will get burned”). An important question that businesses must ask themselves is, “How much damage is ‘too much’?”

Is any acceptable? People are less and less patient with these risk analyses and more and more pressure will be put on organizations that choose unfair preference over equity.

## What you can do

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Creating and sustaining an equitable organization can be both rewarding and challenging. The benefits can include direct and indirect business outcomes and can also align the organization with the character and morality of its leaders. The difficulty is that equity will continue to evolve and shift as society does the same. Organizations will never keep all employees happy all the time so there will always be those who claim equity and seeking the help/ideas of others is a sham and not genuine (in a similar way to concerns regarding workplace safety – “it is window dressing but not the way we actually function”). This reality does not mean equity should not be pursued. It DOES mean equity and inclusion is hard work that will remain forever incomplete – that our focus must be placed upon the process rather than the result – upon the progress rather than the destination) in much in the same way an IT Department operates (the work is never fully done but updates and process improvements are continuously completed).

Below are suggestions of typical items that can be reviewed (or developed) to increase equity in organizations. It is not intended to be a comprehensive list but rather a place to begin the journey toward workplace equity.

- Engagement surveys that can be “cut” using various demographic data while maintaining confidentiality (recommended to be done under the direction of an outside third party or an attorney)
- Compensation data reviewed through various demographic data (recommended to be done under the direction of an outside third party or an attorney)
- Applicant flow, hiring decisions, promotions, disciplinary actions, and employment terminations examined for disparities across various demographics
- Benefits packages reviewed for bias (real or perceived)
- The development of appropriate policies (to ensure equity and eliminate conscious or unconscious bias)
  - Dress codes policies
  - Holiday schedule
  - Time off policies
  - EEO, Harassment, and Diversity Commitments
- Leadership communications and actions regarding equity
- Demographics of leadership and the Board of Directors (if applicable)
- Accountability for equity in performance reviews
- Representation of people having different views, ideas or perspectives within marketing materials and social media activities
- The review and ongoing approval of suppliers and vendors through a “lens” of equity (in addition to a view of promised results)
- Recruitment practices
- Employee involvement/engagement
- Community relationships and Corporate Social Responsibility practices

“Perfection is the enemy of progress” (Winston Churchill) – a great reminder that something done well (but maybe not perfectly) is better than doing nothing. Businesses need to do more than what has been done in the past to foster equity and create truly diverse and inclusive workplaces (and communities). Mistakes will be made and lessons will be learned. It is all part of growth. There will be growing pains but what can become is much greater than what is.